

# Six Steps for Completing Grad School with a Chronic Illness

By Stephanie Lauer

**THREE DAYS AGO**, I took that long walk across the stage for the conferral of my master's degree. I had worries similar to those of other students such as: Do I look OK? Will the speaker say my name right? What if I fall on stage? I also had some worries that only come with having a chronic illness: What if I get sick while waiting to go up? What if I get sick *on* stage? What if my vision gets funky during the long walk? Will I even be able to keep up with the pace of my cohorts? The list goes on and on. The result: I did not fall or get sick on stage.

It was tough, but I managed to keep up with the rest of the graduates. Was it rough? Sure. Was it worth it? Yes! Whenever I accomplish something, small or big, I am so happy and relieved. Accomplishing even the smallest tasks often brings on extra stress and worry, but it makes my accomplishments all the more special.

Getting through grad school is a daunting task for any student. Add a chronic illness to the mix, and the more daunting it gets. The good news is there are some steps to make the daunting doable.

1. *Determine your strengths and weaknesses.* What are you especially good at, and what do you struggle with? I found taking a strength-based approach when picking out a graduate program and school was the best option. I am structured, enjoy writing and am rather independent. My weaknesses included extreme fatigue, constant sickness, difficulty with reading comprehension and an extreme dislike toward mathematics. I needed the flexibility of an online school so I could rest and recover when needed and keep up with treatments. Since I am very structured and enjoy writing, this worked out well. Some students might benefit more from a traditional school depending on their strengths and weaknesses. A pros-and-cons list could



be helpful. A final note on picking out a program that is right for you is to ensure the program is actually something you will be able to make a career out of when you graduate. Depending on your disability, some fields might be more suitable than others.

2. **Research, research, research.** When you think you have researched a school or program enough, research it some more. This is grad school; it's hard, it's expensive and it's going to take over your life for the next few years. Make sure it has the right accreditation and that the program fits your wants and needs, and check out the tuition and financial aid. Contact the disability office before you enroll to find out its policies. Practice your advocacy skills. Determine what the office will need to accommodate you. Ask about how it has accommodated other students. Perhaps the school has had a student with your same illness/disability in the past? Go through your list of trouble areas to see what the school can do. Get *everything* in writing. The school I attended required two out-of-state residencies. Before enrolling, my counselor told me that they could find me a local alternative or try to work something else out. When it came time for the residency, no such proof of that conversation existed, and the school would not waver. It was tough, it was long and it was painful, but I got through it. Lesson learned: Have everything in writing.

3. **Learn self-discipline.** Regardless of the school you choose, you will need to keep on top of the curriculum and keep up with grades. Many graduate schools require that you maintain a B average. You will have a lot of schoolwork and a lot of required readings. You must schedule in time to complete all of this work. With

a chronic illness, you will need to put aside more time to complete the work and have plans in place for when you are sick. You must be flexible and willing to make some sacrifices.

professors what was going on, and they were very understanding. At the same time, don't abuse this. Use these accommodations only when you truly need them. Teachers are more apt to understand when

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4. **Ask for help when you need it.** Help might mean someone to watch the kids for an hour while you write a paper, or someone to help you when you are feeling stuck. With chronic illness, we need to ask for help from others when we are sick so we can take care of ourselves and get well enough to complete our responsibilities. This might also mean asking the professors for guidance. A friend to vent to is also a good idea for any grad student.

5. **Be open and honest with your professors.** By law, professors may not ask you about your disability. This is something I don't really agree with. I found it was much easier to let my professors know what was going on so they could help me when I needed it. I explained to all of my professors about my multiple disability status and the issues it causes. I let them know when I might need some extra time to turn in an assignment and why. For example, I recently had to start infusions, which was very difficult to adjust to and I would feel sick for days after each one. I told my

they see that you are sincere and trying your best. If you are late with every assignment, not only will it undermine the professor's understanding of your situation, but you will fall behind very quickly. As someone who believes that the individual impacts the community, those who abuse accommodations make it more difficult for the disabled population to get what they truly need.

6. **Enjoy the experience!** You will learn a lot of information in grad school that you will take with you for life. Use this time to learn as much as you can and to make friends and as a stepping-stone to the future you desire. I had some extra challenges, but all in all, I really enjoyed the experience.

Good luck to you as you start this exciting step in your life! ■

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